Screwworm Is Back In Texas Cattle—Is DOGE To Blame?

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Mary Whitfill Roeloffs June 4, 2026

Breaking

Screwworm In Texas Cattle Could Drive Up Beef Prices—After DOGE Axed Prevention Efforts

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Topline

A flesh-eating parasite that was largely eradicated from U.S. livestock in the 1960s has been found in a 3-week-old calf in a south Texas border town, the USDA confirmed, a threat that could drive the already soaring price of beef even higher after Elon Musk-led government cuts slashed ongoing efforts to prevent its spread.

Farmer Jose Esquivel and his field of cattle on June 13, 2023 in Quemado, Texas.
Getty Images

Key Facts

New World screwworm, a parasitic fly with larvae that burrow in healthy tissue of cattle, deer, horses and other warm-blooded animals, was discovered in La Pryor, Texas.

The case is the only one that has been identified in the country so far, according to the USDA, but a wider outbreak could severely impact already-suffering cattle numbers and put even more of a strain on ranchers as they spend money on treatment and prevention.

In turn, the price of beef—which has gone up roughly 75% since December 2020—could continue to rise.

The U.S. cattle herd is already at its lowest level in 75 years, and a major screwworm outbreak would cause more calves to die, adult cattle to lose weight and limit what animals are suitable for sale, meaning fewer pounds of beef reaching the market.

Even without a major outbreak, containment efforts may cause the government to implement widespread cattle movement restrictions, limit border crossings or impose quarantine on

certain herds, all of which would further impact the nation's cattle numbers.

The return of screwworm comes after the Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency, launched by the Trump administration, last year cut funding for a project dedicated to monitoring and containing New World screwworm in Central America.

The funding was axed days before the U.S. ended a temporary suspension of cattle imports from Mexico, meaning livestock was allowed to cross the border without any of the monitoring previously funded by the U.S. Agency of International Development (USAID).

Agriculture officials and cattle industry leaders raised alarm about the cuts at the time and, for the last several months, pleaded with the government to step in as they monitored screwworm infections moving north through Mexico—but they were ignored, Texas Agriculture Commissioner Sid Miller told NBC News.

Crucial Quote

"Instead of using every available tool, USDA moved too slowly and relied solely on a partial solution that takes years to fully implement," Miller said, adding a plea for President Donald Trump to "throw every available federal resource at this threat before it becomes a full-blown agricultural disaster."

What Is Screwworm?

New World screwworm is a fly that lays its eggs in open wounds and body openings of warm-blooded animals. Infestations start when a female fly lays eggs on open wounds—wounds as small as a tick bite can attract a female fly to lay her eggs—or other parts of the body in live animals. Eggs hatch into maggots that feed on the living flesh for about 7 days before the larvae drop to the ground, burrow into the soil, and emerge as adult screwworm flies—starting the cycle again. Most infestations occur in animals, but they can occur in people. The most recent human case in the U.S. was reported in Maryland last year in a traveler who'd returned from El Salvador. The person recovered.

Key Background

The United States eradicated screwworm in the 1960s through a massive sterile fly program, but outbreaks in Mexico and Central America have raised concerns about the parasite moving north again. The eradication was the result of multiple sterile fly programs across the south that cost roughly $42 million in the mid 1960s, the equivalent of about $452 million today. Despite the programs' success, there have been stand-alone instances of screwworm since, including an isolated outbreak in Texas in 1976 that cost ranches an estimated $452 per head

of cattle in today's dollars, totaling $732 million. Those losses came from cattle death, weight loss and hide damage and the cost of surveillance and treatment. Evidence suggests screwworm outbreaks of the past did drive the price of beef higher, though not necessarily in a dramatic nationwide surge, because ranchers in the 1950s and 60s were working in a much stronger industry with higher herd numbers.The U.S. cattle herd had dropped to 86.2 million head of cattle and calves on U.S. farms as of Jan. 1, the lowest number of cattle in America since 1951. In May, the USDA said it predicts beef production will decline by 0.9 percent to 25.310 billion pounds in 2027 and said cattle prices are "projected to reach new highs as supplies remain limited." The average price of ground beef has risen from $3.95 in December of 2020 to $6.89 in April, according to the Federal Reserve.

Big Number

$1.8 billion. That's how much economic damage could be caused by another outbreak on the scale of the Texas incident in 1976, according to USDA estimates.

What To Watch For

How the government tries to contain the spread. Officials from Texas and the USDA are taking steps to "contain and eradicate" screwworm, the agency said, including implementing cattle quarantines, movement controls and surveillance within a 20 kilometer area of the infected calf; trapping flies along the border; and releasing millions of sterile male New World screwworm flies in the region.

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